



# Mother of All Pigs

*Malu Halasa*

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## **Mother of All Pigs** Malu Halasa

The Sabas family lives in a small Jordanian town that for centuries has been descended upon by all manner of invaders, and now Evangelical tourists. The community relies on the bric-a-brac smuggled in during the throes of war, the quality of which depends entirely on who's fighting. This time the action is in Syria, and the threat of ISIS lies just across the border. The water delivery is less frequent, but life in the town persists and Hussein Sabas is the Levant's only pig butcher, selling all manner of chops, sausages, and hams, much to the chagrin of his observant neighbors. His source is the Mother of All Pigs, an illicitly trafficked sow. A former Lieutenant in the Jordanian military, Hussein is familiar with black ops, but the popularity of his porcine products is about to give him away. When a former soldier in his regiment arrives, after a brief stint in Afghanistan as a mujahideen, Hussein finds himself with yet another thing to hide. Complicating matters, his niece Muna from America is visiting for the first time, and the encounter with her totally Western granddaughter has forced Mother Fadhma to confront her sheltered life of obligations and servitude, first to her callous and enterprising brother Abu Za'atar, and then to her husband, now dead, and children, most of whom left Jordan for the states. Her youngest daughter Samira also harbors a dangerous secret: she's joined the Syrian rebel cause, and becomes involved in a covert operation leading back to the mother of all pigs, that will change this family forever.

## **Mother of All Pigs Details**

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# From Reader Review Mother of All Pigs for online ebook

**Joslyn Allen says**

Review published: <https://chronicbibliophilia.wordpress...>

“‘Such a party last night.’ The words come out long and heavy like a sigh, but the inflection rises. She is soliciting his opinion.

Hussein sits utterly still. He knows she would appreciate a conversation about the party, about Muna, about anything, but he needs to save the already depleted energy he has for the long day ahead.

When she receives absolutely no acknowledgment Mother Fadhma’s small eyes narrow. She wants to scold him for eating too little and drinking too much; however, her silence was secured long ago. Even when he makes a fool of himself, as he did last night, she forgives him. On the rare occasion that she does summon the courage to rebuke him, her admonitions are gentle and consoling.”

In this debut novel from an American writer of Jordanian and Filipina descent, the reader gets a glimpse of life in a small, conflict-ridden, rural, border town in modern Jordan, a town in which Christian residents and the growing Muslim population of long-time residents and recent refugees are often at odds. The Sabas family, headed by three generations of fearsome women, does its best to coexist and get by.

“Although Laila harbors many doubts about the society in which she lives, she meticulously stays within conventional boundaries, and she expects those she lives with to do the same. Samira, her husband’s unmarried half sister, is particularly vulnerable since relatively little is needed -perhaps only a rumor of a girl’s indiscretion – for the entire town to become inflamed and a family ostracized forever. In a culture where a woman’s virtue is paramount, any defense of it is a sign of its erosion. Better to avoid scrutiny. The women of the Sabas family have to protect one another because no one else will.”

Hussein, the only man of the house, has returned from a somewhat secret military past and has become the town butcher. Led by his devious, black-market savvy uncle Abu Za’atar, Hussein becomes the areas only not-so-secret pig butcher, and his dealings of pork products puts his family on edge and often under threat from angry neighbors.

Halasa’s is an interesting look at religious and nationalist tensions from within the “Arab world”, a view not only of the clear challenges and dangers of political dissent and repression, but also of the not uncommon discontent of residents who feel displaced and disgruntled by “others”.

“‘I just don’t know when the country will return to normal and our town will belong to us.’

Hussein finds Mrs. Habash’s memory highly selective. The town has never been theirs. When their grandfathers and uncles and fathers – then small boys – first settled, they fought side by side against local nomads over a watering hold. Go back a few generations and someone somewhere is always fleeing or seeking sanctuary with strangers. The entire region has a long history of forced migration. The Syrians are not the first refugees, nor will they be the last.”

Though there were, sprinkled throughout “Mother of All Pigs”, moments of awkward dialogue where characters over explain facts and motives, clearly intended for the reader and not the audience, the story itself had compelling characters and was a promising start. With more editorial input and polish, I think Halasa’s voice could be more resonant and her narrative something special.

Thank you to Unnamed Press for providing an Advance Review Copy in exchange for a fair and honest review. "Mother of All Pigs" was released in the US on November 14, 2017.

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### **Heather says**

3.5

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### **Alice Stephens says**

An excellent novel about an underserved subject: the effect of endless war and religious, tribal and factional discord on the local population of one family living in Jordan near the border of Syria and the Golan Heights. Heartbreaking and utterly relevant to everything that is happening in the world today.

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### **Anneke Alnatour says**

Oh, there is so much potential there, but it just didn't work for me. Is it the editing? The many story lines? There was just something off with the book, and I so much wanted to like it, especially because I have lived in Jordan, and there were many instances that I could definitely relate to.

A bit of a let down for me, unfortunately.

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### **Lanie Tankard says**

Here's my review:

<https://www.worldliteraturetoday.org/...>

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### **Kirk says**

I truly loved this book. However, I will caveat that with, it took me much longer than normal to finish. The content was never exciting or thrilling. Quite honestly it was just the day in the life of a simple family from Jordan.

What I found myself drawn to was the variety of characters presented and each of their lives. They all had unique upbringings, personalities, struggles and motivations, yet were all living as one family in one house. The intricacies of the family dynamic as well as the cultural implications were fascinating.

Would strongly recommend this book but know it is a bit of a dry read.

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## Homa S says

First, let me say that I loved this book. I thought it was well-done and I thoroughly enjoyed delving into the lives of this Jordanian family, seeing what each of their motivations were, and figuring out how their paths intertwined. There were a few moments in this book that seemed very "instructional" - I don't know why, it feel like a Western audience was being instructed, as though to say "This is how we really are, America!" but I guess maybe that's sort of the point: we are being shown a point of view that is often misrepresented or misunderstood. I don't necessarily think it needs more "plot" - when you're talking about the lives of women in the Middle East, realistically it doesn't involve a heck of a lot outside of the home - but I do think it could have been a little more subtle.

"Listening to Mustafa, Hussein wonders if anything has changed at all. The present conflicts - Alawi vs. Dunni; Salifi vs. the Jordanian intelligence; Saudi Arabia vs. Iran - may appear localized, but they have been shaped by Western invasion and interference. Grated it wasn't the barefaced colonialism of this his father's day. Now a slight of hand was at play, due in part to the availability of more sophisticated long-range weaponry. But whether you're murdered close up or from far away, the message for subjugated peoples is the same: toe the fucking line. all the wars that have been started and withdrawn from, or dragged out as long-simmering territorial occupations, have left a legacy of bloodshed. Every country has been affected...or, as Hussein corrects himself, infected. So many lives wasted and for nothing."

It's really easy to be overwhelmed and forget about all the different places in the world that have been rocked by violence (and still are to this day), it's easy to forget that those people are suffering, it's easy to judge, but I think this is a good reminder of their humanity.

I admittedly don't know a lot about Jordanian culture and this was a great, brief introduction into their realities. In a way, the book did what it's meant to do, I compared this culture and country to my own and walked away with a feeling that we are more similar than we let on. I loved reading about the strength of women, in other places of the world, working to free themselves from the shackles of tradition and sexism.

"Women are a bridge to the future. Women are the donkeys of tradition. Women are caregivers and self-obsessed. they suffocate and love. They abuse and they suffer. The killer or the victim, which one are you?"  
"Drip by drip, like water, we melt stone!"

What I absolutely LOVED the italic interludes. I knew something was coming, as I read the first such passage, but I didn't know what it would be. I thought these were every well done, well-written, and well-integrated into the rest of the story.

All-in-all, I flew through this book. It was an easy read but it made me think about my own identity a little bit and loved it.

"I wonder where someone like me fits in?" Muna surveys the wooden lean-to on the roof next door, which provides shelter for the empty cushions and chairs from the sun. 'For most of my life I've been too mixed for the Arabs, and before ethnic diversity became fashionable in the US, I was too odd for them, too.'

Samira can't believe that she has been talking about the incredibly desperate situation in Syria and Muna's

reaction is to think about herself."

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## **Carol Peters says**

boring

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## **Gina says**

This a great story of Hussein and his Christian Arab family living in Jordan. It presents a refreshing perspective and insight that differs from the usual news bulletin served up to us in the West. Hussein's family are caught up in the cross currents of Middle Eastern rivalries as their known world changes around them. Refugees, spies, religious police and religious hard liners, opposing values and betrayal are all brought to bear in the life of the family and its members. The book is packed with fascinating insights into life in a Middle East devastated by war, as well as dishing out a few swipes at Western interference and its subsequent apathy at the consequences.

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## **Dirk says**

The strength of Malu Halasa's debut novel lies in the clarity of vision it presents as a window on middle eastern society and the conjoined twin forces of politics and religion that drive it. As is clear from the author's bio, she established her bona fides in her several previous non-fiction works of the region, and so when her characters give voice to the issues and conflicts that confront them, they speak with the resonant authority of people who have been there/experienced that. This isn't armchair commentary of stereotyped groups from a safe distance; it's on-the-ground reporting that evokes the feel and flavor of distinct lives distinctly lived. The particularity of characterizations and descriptions of places and events has the clean-edged focus that a writer acquires only through astute observation as opposed to the vivid but less defined realms of imagination filling in blanks.

However, Halasa's background in non-fiction imposes limits on the novel. She is so very good at drawing the many characters that form the Sabas family that the story at times becomes disjointed in the shifts from one point of view to another, and it is difficult to become fully invested in one or a few individual players. While good at presenting background through family histories and a sense of where the characters have arrived and the forces that drive them, there is less clarity about where they are headed. Towards the end of the novel, the story doesn't go where the reporter hasn't been. So, while there are thoughtful and relevant discussions of relationship stresses and sexual tensions in a male-dominant society, there is neither full breakage nor reconciliation. Similarly, the polarizing religious forces that drive groups toward violence are not consummated through action in scene. There is no satisfactory denouement of the critical conflicts presented among the various actors, which, while such a result may be true to life in many instances, it is not what most readers come to expect in fiction. Still, for its accuracy, empathy and thoughtfulness, *Mother of All Pigs* is a very good read.

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## **Beverly says**

thoughts coming shortly

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## **Shelley says**

Fascinating story of a large family in Jordan, with a cousin visiting from the U.S. They are Christians surrounded by Muslims from Syria and Palestine. The patriarch of the household is a butcher, threatened by Muslims who are against eating pork. The butcher raises an amazing pig, the mother of all pigs, who even gets a voice in the story. The women of the household are from three generations, all with different views of a woman's place in the home and in the world.

The author does a good job showing multiple perspectives: the men who have been in war and are still fighting one way or another, the women who are also fighting in different ways, and of course the pig who symbolizes so much of the conflict.

If you are interested in cross cultural experience and the political conflicts of the Middle East, try this tale.....

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## **Ross says**

One of the purposes of fiction is to bring us to new worlds, and in these times of isolation and entrenched views, that role is ever more important. Through literature we develop empathy. Mother of All Pigs succeeds in this level, revealing the lives of this Christian Jordanian family, particularly its women, to western readers, allowing us to better understand that achieving religious and political peace in the Middle East, not to mention domestic equality, is not so simple a task as we might think. Unfortunately, author Malu Halasa tends to let the instructional component of this role overwhelm the narrative itself. We learn but we don't fully feel for these characters as they wrestle with the past and possible futures.

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## **Kevin O'brien says**

Eye opening book about the modern Middle East. Covers a lot of ground while still staying rooted in the very real lives of it's characters.

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## **Jared Levine says**

This a stunning debut! A much needed literary voice to add to our cannon. DAMN! I loved these characters, this family, and this story!! Highly recommend. (I had to rave about it first.)

I've grown tired of the western narrative about middle eastern culture that insist upon it's savagery. This here—a dynamic book about family and supporting each other, and reclaiming the essences of one's independent self, set in this Jordanian town, filled with nuance and impeccable details, characters that I

LOVE—is exactly what I needed.

—Jared, bookseller City Lights

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